

"I don't have a book. And Mrs. Wilcott won't let me check out any from the library."

"Well, let's see," said Carla. "Do you think you might know somebody else who might let you borrow a book? Think hard now."

Bradley looked around at all the books in her office. "May I borrow one of yours?" he asked. "Please. I won't scribble in it."

Carla walked around the table, then picked out a book from a stack on top of one of her bookcases. "It's my favorite," she said as she gave it to Bradley.

He read the title and laughed. *My Parents Didn't Steal an Elephant*, by Uriah C. Lasso.

He opened to page one and read the first sentence.

I hate tomato juice.

He thought that was a funny sentence to start a book. He continued reading.

Every morning, Aunt Ruth gives me a glass of tomato juice, and every morning I tell her I hate it. "Fine, Dumpling," she always says, "don't drink it."

She calls me Dumpling. Uncle Boris calls me Corn Flake. They're crazy. One of these days I'm afraid they're going to try to eat me.

He glanced up at Carla, then returned to the book.

My parents are in jail. They got arrested for stealing an elephant from the circus. Only they didn't do it. If they stole an elephant I'd know about it, wouldn't I? I mean, if your parents stole an elephant, don't you think you'd know about it?

I think the elephant just ran away. Her master was always mean to her. He whipped her and made her do stupid tricks. My parents used to complain about that a lot. That's why everybody thinks they stole her.

So, anyway, that's why I have to live with my crazy Aunt Ruth and Uncle Boris. If you ask me, they belong in the circus. They're crazy!

Uncle Boris always smokes a cigar. It just hangs out of the corner of his mouth. Whenever he kisses my aunt, he swings the cigar out of the way with his tongue, and kisses her out of the side of his mouth.

I bet you think Aunt Ruth doesn't like it when he kisses her that way. Wrong. She always laughs when he does it.

Sometimes she smokes a cigar, too. I told you they were crazy.

Look! He even smokes his cigar while he's drinking tomato juice.

The bell rang. Bradley was amazed by how quickly the time had passed. "Do you want to have lunch together again?" he asked.

"I'm sorry. I'm having lunch with the president of the school board," said Carla. "I'd much rather eat lunch with you."

He didn't mind too much. At least he had her book to read.

They shook hands, then he walked back to class. He placed the hall pass back on the hook and took his seat.

He knew he'd write a good book report because he had such a good book to read. I just hope I don't rip it up.

"Whatcha doin', Bradley?" asked Ronnie.

"He's reading," Bartholomew replied nastily. "He says he doesn't want to be disturbed. He thinks he's too good for us now that he does his homework."

"Oh, be quiet and let him read if that's what he wants to do," said Ronnie.

"Thanks, Ronnie," said Bradley. "I knew you'd understand."

"I knew you'd understand," mimicked Bartholomew.

Ronnie understood. She knew about Carla.

Bradley returned to his book.

Uncle Boris and Aunt Ruth are married. I bet you thought you already knew that, except you're not as smart as you think you are. They were my uncle and aunt even before they got married. Uncle Boris is my mother's brother and Aunt Ruth is my father's sister. They didn't even know each other until my parents got arrested for stealing the elephant. Then they both came here to take care of me. Hah! They fell in love and got married a week later. It was sickening! You're lucky you weren't here.

I've been cheated out of an aunt and an uncle. If they had each married somebody else, then I'd have two aunts and two uncles. Now I only have one aunt and one uncle. I wonder what happened to the aunt and uncle I don't have. I wonder if they married each other, too.

Bradley looked up. He tried to make sense out of that last paragraph. It made him think. A lot of parts in the book made him think. That was one of the things he liked about it. It made him think about his father, too. About why the man who shot him wasn't in jail.

There was a knock on the door. His mother entered holding a piece of paper. "Oh, you're reading," she said. "That's good."

"It's a good book," he replied.

"I just got this letter from the Concerned Parents Organization," she said. "There's going to be some sort of meeting about Miss Davis, your counselor."

Bradley's heart fluttered.

"It says if I have any complaints I should come to the meeting." She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think I have any complaints. She seems to be helping you. Do you have any complaints?"

"Oh, no! He doesn't have any complaints." Claudia laughed, coming in behind her mother. "He's in love with her. I heard him say it to his animals."

"What?" Bradley exclaimed in a very high voice.

Claudia snickered. "Look, Mom, he's blushing! That proves he loves her."

Bradley wished he could crawl under his bed and hide.

"It doesn't prove anything," said Mrs. Chalkers. "Quit teasing your brother."

"Where'd you get the book, Bradley?" Claudia asked, like she already knew the answer.

His heart was beating very fast. "Carla gave it to me."

"Carla gave it to him," Claudia repeated.

"Well, I don't care where he got the book," said Mrs. Chalkers. "I'm just happy to see he's reading it."

"The only reason he's reading is because he's in love with his teacher," said Claudia.

"She's not my teacher, she's my counselor," said Bradley.

Claudia roared with laughter. His mother laughed, too, but she quickly covered her mouth.

"I didn't say I was in love with her!" Bradley insisted. "We were just talking about my counselor, not my teacher, that's all!"

"Are you going to let him marry her, Mom?" asked Claudia.

Mrs. Chalkers smiled. "Well, I don't know. She seems like a very lovely girl."

Bradley felt like he was going to die. His sister was hysterical.

"So you don't have any complaints about Miss Davis?" his mother asked seriously, getting back to the letter.

"She's okay," he said without emotion.

Claudia snickered.

"Well, then, I won't go to the meeting," said his mother. "C'mon, let's leave your brother alone."

"The Concerned Parents Organization never likes anything," said Claudia. "They're always causing trouble at my school, too. They want to turn kids into robots."

Bradley watched his sister and mother walk out of his room and shut the door behind them.

He lay down on his bed. His face was on fire. "So, I love her? What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," said Ronnie. "They just don't understand about love."

The door opened again. Claudia stuck her face inside and said, "If the Concerned Parents Organization ever found out Carla kissed you, she'd be fired for sure!"

Bradley paid close attention as Mrs. Ebbel taught arithmetic. He nodded his head every time she said something that he already knew. Once he almost raised his hand to answer a question, but he lost his nerve. Somebody else gave the answer he would have given. I knew it, he thought as he nodded his head.

He had spent recess in the library reading *My Parents Didn't Steal an Elephant* by Uriah C. Lasso. When he was leaving the library, Mrs. Wilcott stopped him and said, "You were reading, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Good for you, Bradley! Good for you!"

He smiled now as he remembered it. It's because of Carla's book, he thought. The book was his lucky charm. As long as he had it with him, it seemed like nothing could go wrong.

His black eye was all gone too.

When the bell rang for lunch, he put his arithmetic book away, took out his lucky book, and walked to Mrs. Ebbel's desk. "May I please borrow the hall pass?" he asked.

She let him have it. He knew she would. He was holding the magic book.

He walked to Carla's office. Just as he was raising his fist to knock, she opened the door. "Bradley, what a pleasant surprise!"

"You want to have lunch together?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I can't. I have to go to the principal's office."

"What's the matter? Did you get in trouble?" he joked.

She didn't laugh at his joke. She shrugged her shoulders, then headed toward the principal's office.

Maybe she really did get in trouble, Bradley thought as he watched her go. It's probably because she doesn't believe in rules. She must have broken one without knowing it. I should have warned her. But he wasn't too worried. He couldn't imagine anything bad ever happening to Carla.

He walked through the auditorium and outside to the playground. He sat down on the steps outside the auditorium and ate his lunch. At least he had her book with him. That was almost as good as eating lunch with her.

He didn't read while he ate. He was afraid he might accidentally spill food on the book even if there were no such things as accidents.

Colleen Verigold walked by.

"Hello, Colleen!" he called to her.

She stopped and looked at him oddly, then walked away without returning his hello.

Bradley didn't mind. He had said hello to Colleen because he knew Carla would appreciate it. He felt Carla was watching over him. And it didn't matter that Colleen didn't say hello back, because in his heart he heard Carla say, Hello, Bradley. It's a pleasure to see you today.

He finished eating, then opened the book.

Guess what they've done now? They wallpapered the garage. I told you they were crazy! Whoever heard of anybody putting wallpaper on the walls of a garage? Purple paper with yellow polka dots!

I don't even know how they got in there. The garage has been locked shut for months. The lock was broken or something so nobody could get in.

At least I'm glad they finally got it open. It was beginning to smell pretty bad. You could smell it from the driveway.

Now it just smells like paste.

I can't wait until my parents get home and put an end to all this craziness. Their trial is next week. They have to be found innocent.

I mean, if they stole an elephant I'd know about it, wouldn't I? Where could you hide an elephant?

"Look, he's reading," said Robbie.

"I didn't know he knew how to read," laughed Curtis.

Bradley looked up. He was surrounded by Jeff and his gang.

"He can't read," said Brian. "He just looks at the pictures!"

They all laughed.

"Whatcha readin'?" asked Russell.

Bradley closed the book and slowly stood on the concrete steps.

"Chicken Chalkers," said Dan.

Andy bounced a basketball.

Bradley glanced behind him. Doug was blocking the door to the auditorium. "What's the matter, Bradley?" he asked.

"Hey, Chalkers, what's the name of your book?" asked Robbie.

He looked at his book, then stared defiantly at Robbie.

"Let me see it," said Robbie.

Bradley clutched it against his chest. No matter what, he wasn't going to let them harm Carla's book.

"Aw, c'mon, Bradley, be a pal," said Robbie. "I just want to see it."

Curtis chuckled.

Robbie stepped up toward him. "You can't read anyway," he said. "Give it to me and I'll read it to you." He reached out and rested his hand on the book.

Bradley jerked it away.

"Uh-oh, I think he's getting angry," said Brian.

"I just want to see it," said Robbie. Again, he reached for the book.

Bradley held it under his left arm and against his chest. He made his right hand into a fist.

Robbie backed away. "Jeff," he called.

"C'mon, Jeff, teach him a lesson," said Dan.

Jeff stepped between Andy and Russell.

"All right!" said Curtis.

"Hold on," said Andy. "Let'm get off the steps."

The boys backed up. Bradley, clutching his book, walked down the concrete steps to where Jeff was waiting.

"Do you want me to hold your book, Bradley?" said Andy.

Bradley glanced at him.

"Don't worry," he said sincerely. "I won't hurt it."

Bradley handed Andy the book, then looked back at Jeff.

They stood on a patch of grass and dirt and faced each other. The bruise around Jeff's eye had turned brown with a greenish tint. Jeff raised his fists.

The other boys formed a circle around them.

"C'mon, get'm, Jeff," urged Brian.

"Give him another black eye," said Russell.

Bradley readied himself. He raised his fists in the air, then lowered them. He had an idea.

"Hello, Jeff," he said.

Robbie snickered.

Jeff stared at him, wide-eyed. "Hello, Bradley," he replied.

Bradley smiled. He held out his hand.

Jeff smiled too. It was his first honest smile in a long time. He shook his best friend's hand.

The other boys were dumbfounded. No one said a word.

Andy finally broke the ice. "Do you like to play basketball, Bradley?" he asked.

Bradley looked at him, bewildered. "I'm not very good," he said.

"So? None of us are," said Jeff, patting him on the back.

"Now we'll have even teams!" said Robbie.

Bradley was terrible!

He dribbled with two hands. He passed the ball to people who weren't on his team. But, worst of all, whenever anyone passed the ball to him, he said "thank you."

He never shot at the basket. He didn't dare. Finally, after his team was losing 28 to 6 anyway, everyone told him to try a shot.

He looked around for someone to pass to.

Jeff sat down so Bradley wouldn't pass it to him. "Just shoot," he said.

The rest of his team sat down too. "Shoot it!" they said.

Everybody on the other team sat down too. "Shoot the ball!"

Bradley faced the basket. His tongue slipped out the corner of his mouth as he carefully aimed, then threw the ball high in the air. It hit the back of the rim, bounced against the backboard, then dropped through the net.

"Great shot!" said Jeff.

"Way to go," said Andy, patting him on the back.

At first he couldn't believe it, but then he saw Carla's book, lying on the ground at the base of the basket. No wonder, he realized.

Everyone headed for the water fountain. Bradley went along, too, even though he wasn't thirsty. But then, once he got there, he realized he was thirsty. He just hadn't noticed.

"Good game, Bradley," said Brian.

"You just have to stop passing to people who aren't on your team!" said Dan.

"Maybe you should give the rest of us on your team black eyes too," said Robbie. "Then you'll know who to pass to." Everyone laughed, even Bradley.

He and Jeff were the last two left at the water fountain. Everyone else had already started back to class. As they drank, their eyes met and they broke up laughing.

"How did you get the black eye?" Bradley asked after he stopped laughing.

"Melinda," said Jeff.

Bradley nodded. "She's strong," he said.

"Oh boy, you can say that again," said Jeff.

They laughed again.

"My book!" Bradley suddenly exclaimed. He ran back to the basketball court where he'd left it.

Jeff shook his head as he watched Bradley run away. Life's weird, he thought.

He walked into the boys' bathroom and splashed his sweaty face with cold water. He had to hold the faucet down with one hand and splash his face with the other.

Colleen Verigold walked in.

He stared at her.

She looked around, then screamed and ran outside.

Jeff watched the door swing shut behind her.

Life was too weird for Jeff to return to class.

Anytime you want to talk again, Carla had said, please feel free to come and see me. Even if you just feel like getting out of class for a while.

He hoped she had really meant it. He had a lot he wanted to say to her, beginning with "I'm sorry."

He slowly walked to her office. He hoped she wasn't with somebody else. He knocked.

Carla opened the door and smiled when she saw him. "Hello, Jeff."

He smiled. "Hi, Carla. I'm—"

He stopped because he saw somebody else sitting at the round table.

"I believe you two know each other," said Carla.

Jeff lowered his eyes. "Hello, Colleen," he muttered.

Colleen Verigold covered her face with her hands.

"You don't mind if Jeff joins us, do you, Colleen?" Carla asked.

Colleen shook her head with her hands still over her face.

Jeff awkwardly sat down. "Mrs. Ebbel doesn't know I'm here," he said.

"I'll write you a note," said Carla.

Colleen peeked out from between her fingers. "I'm not supposed to be here either," she said.

Carla turned to Colleen. "So what's the big emergency? Can you say it in front of Jeff?"

"He already knows," said Colleen. She looked at Jeff. "You better not tell anybody!"

"I won't," Jeff promised.

"Tell anybody what?" asked Carla.

"Colleen walked into the boys' bathroom," said Jeff. "I was there washing my face."

"Jeff!" Colleen exploded. "You just promised you wouldn't tell!"

"Oops," said Jeff. He blushed. "It was only Carla. You were going to tell her anyway, weren't you?"

Colleen smiled at him. "I didn't go there on purpose," she explained to Carla. "It was an accident."

"I don't believe in accidents," said Carla.

Colleen stared at her in amazement. She wondered how Carla knew she had gone in after Jeff on purpose. She turned to Jeff. "I'm sorry for saying hello to you when you didn't like it."

"That's okay."

"Anyway, how was I supposed to know you didn't like it? You always said hello back."

"I know. I can't help it. Whenever anybody says hello to me, I always have to say hello back." He looked at the picture of the green monster with six hands hanging on the wall. "If a big scary monster said, 'Hello, Jeff,' I'd probably say hello back to it, too."

Colleen laughed.

"Well, what's wrong with that?" demanded Carla. "If a monster says hello to you, you should say hello to it. If you don't, then I have to wonder which one of you is really the monster."

Colleen frowned. She suddenly remembered that Bradley Chalkers had said hello to her at the beginning of the lunch period and she had walked away without saying hello back. It made her feel terrible.

"You can say hello to me whenever you want," said Jeff.

She smiled again. "Hello, Jeff," she said.

"Hello, Colleen," said Jeff.

"I read somewhere," said Carla, "that in Zen, the most important rule is that when one person says hello to you, you have to say hello back."

"What's Zen?" asked Colleen.

"A religion," answered Carla. She got a book from her bookcase. "Here it is." She read aloud from *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* by J. D. Salinger: "In certain Zen monasteries, it's a cardinal rule ... that when one monk calls out 'Hi' to another monk, the latter must call back 'Hi!' without thinking."

"Jeff should be a Zen monk!" Colleen exclaimed with delight.

Jeff laughed. "I already say hello to anybody who says hello to me," he said proudly.

"Can girls be Zen monks too?" Colleen asked.

"Why not?" asked Carla.

Colleen laughed with delight. Then she said, "Jeff, do you want to come to my birthday party next Sunday?"

"Yes!" said Jeff. "That's the second most important rule about being a Zen monk. Whenever another Zen monk invites you to a birthday party, you have to say yes!"

Colleen laughed again. "You're the only boy so far," she said. "I'll invite one more, but only one. I can't invite too many boys."

Suddenly she looked very serious. She knew what she had to do.

Before dinner, while it was still light, Bradley's father, bad leg and all, taught Bradley how to dribble. Bradley could hardly wait to show his friends.

The next morning, when the bell rang for recess, everyone hurried outside.

Except Bradley.

First, he had to put his paper neatly in his notebook. Then he had to mark his place in his book and put all his pencils in his pencil holder. Then he put everything away, neatly, in his desk.

He rushed out the door.

"Hello, Bradley," said Colleen.

He stopped cold.

Colleen closed her eyes tightly, then opened them. With the determination of a Zen monk, she asked, "Would you like to come to my birthday party on Sunday?"

Bradley stared at her.

"Jeff will be there," said Colleen. "He's the only other boy. Everyone else will be girls. I would have invited you sooner, except, um, I just found out when it was."

Bradley nodded his head until his mouth worked. "Yes!" he said.

"Good," said Colleen, then scooted away.

Bradley stared after her, then turned around in a circle as he tried to remember which way he was going.

"Bradley!" called Andy. "Hurry up! We need you."

He ran to the basketball court. He forgot everything he had learned about dribbling.

"Is he coming?" asked Melinda.

Colleen nodded.

Lori stuck out her tongue and screamed.

"It'll be fun," said Melinda. "Bradley's not the same as he was. I think he's gotten better."

"Oh, you can't come anymore, Melinda," said Colleen.

"Why not?" she asked, obviously very hurt.

"Because they're coming, and you beat them up!"

"But they started it."

Colleen stared at her, hands on hips. She couldn't believe Melinda was being so unreasonable.

"I thought I was your best friend," said Melinda.

"You are," said Colleen. "But they're boys. Oh, okay. You can come. But you better not cause any more trouble."

"I thought I was your best friend," said Lori.

That night Bradley lay in bed, too excited to sleep. He couldn't wait until tomorrow when he'd see Carla again. He had so much to share with her. And it was all because of her magic book.

He turned on the light above his head and read aloud to Ronnie and Bartholomew. They laughed whenever he did.

"I just met Ace.

He's my parents' lawyer. Guess what? He's crazier than my Aunt and Uncle put together.

The first thing he said to me was, 'Do you like peanuts?'

'They're okay,' I answered.

'Good,' he said. He gave me a peanut and I ate it.

'Do you want another peanut?' he asked.

I shrugged.

So he gave me another peanut and I ate that one, too. Big deal.

'You must really like peanuts a lot,' he said.

I told you he was crazy.

'I want you to remember that,' he said. 'If anybody asks you, you really like peanuts a lot.'

'Okay, I really like peanuts a lot,' I said.

Then he gave me three more peanuts! 'Eat these!'

I ate them.

'You just ate three peanuts in five seconds,' he said. Can you believe it? He had timed me. Tell me he isn't crazy!'

"He isn't crazy," laughed Ronnie.

"Why is he making such a big deal over peanuts?" asked Bartholomew.

"I don't know," said Bradley.

There was a loud knock on his door, then his father entered. "It's past your bedtime, Bradley," he said.

"Okay," said Bradley. He reached for his light.

"Oh, you were reading," his father noticed. "Well, that's all right then. You can stay up if you want to read."

Bradley smiled. Once again, the magic book had kept him from getting into trouble.

“So, what did the kids think of your dribbling?”

“I forgot how,” Bradley admitted. He hated to disappoint his father.

“I guess we need to practice more,” said his father. “Maybe this weekend I’ll put up a backboard on the garage.” He said good night and walked out of Bradley’s room.

“Come on, I want to hear about the peanuts,” said Bartholomew.

Bradley continued reading.

“So then he asked me, ‘Are you good at math?’

Well, I don’t like to brag but math happens to be my best subject. Big deal.

‘Okay, here’s a math problem for you,’ he said. ‘If you can eat three peanuts in five seconds, how long would it take for you to eat fifty thousand peanuts?’

I got out a pencil and paper and figured it out. ‘About twenty-three hours and nine minutes.’

‘That’s less than a day, isn’t it?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘There are twenty-four hours in a day.’ He’s supposed to be my parents’ lawyer and he doesn’t even know how many hours there are in a day!

‘Remember that,’ he told me. ‘If anybody asks you, you can eat fifty thousand peanuts per day.’

I laughed. ‘Who would ask me that?’

‘The police.’ ”

The chapter ended there.

Bradley giggled as he walked to Carla’s office for his regularly scheduled appointment. He couldn’t wait to tell her all that had happened to him. She’ll be so happy! he thought.

She was waiting for him in the hall, just outside her office. But before she could say anything, he beat her to it.

“Hello, Carla,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to see you today. I appreciate coming to see you.”

She smiled. “The pleasure is mine,” she replied.

He laughed. He got a kick out of being polite.

They shook hands, then went inside to the round table. She was wearing a dark blue shirt, almost black, with little white stars on it. She looked like nighttime.

“So what’s new?” she asked.

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He didn’t know why, but for some reason he didn’t want to tell her.

“What’s new with you?” he asked.

“With me?” asked Carla. “Nobody’s ever asked me that before.”

“You’re always asking me what’s new,” he said. “Why can’t I ask you?”

“You can!” she replied. “You can ask me anything you want. Let me see. What’s new? I bought a new shower curtain yesterday. But that doesn’t sound like very interesting news, does it?”

“What color?”

“Oh, sort of beige, I don’t know, it doesn’t really have a color.”

“That’s a good color,” said Bradley. “It sounds beautiful.”

“It’s okay,” said Carla.

“What happened to your old shower curtain?” he asked.

“It started getting a little rotten,” said Carla.

“Was it also beige?”

“Um, no,” said Carla. “I think it was yellow when it was new, but it was sort of a greenish brown when—”

“Colleen invited me to her birthday party!” he blurted. Then it all came pouring out of him.

“Jeff’s invited too. We’ll be the only boys. Everyone else will be girls. Jeff and I are friends now. The other guys like me too. We play basketball together. At first I was afraid to shoot the ball, but then everybody said, ‘Shoot, Bradley, shoot,’ so I shot and made it! Everyone was amazed. So was I. I still miss a lot more than I make, but I’m getting better. Everyone says so. My father taught me how to dribble. He’s going to put a basket over the garage. At first they wanted to beat me up, but I said, ‘Hello, Jeff,’ and he said, ‘Hello, Bradley,’ and then Andy asked me if I wanted

to play basketball. Then Colleen asked me to her birthday party and I said, 'Yes,' and she said, 'Good.' She would have asked me sooner except she just found out when she was born."

Fortunately, Carla had heard most of it already, otherwise she wouldn't have understood a thing he said.

"It's all because of you," said Bradley.

"You did it, Bradley, not me."

"It was your magic book!"

"My book? What's that got to do with—Bradley, what's wrong?"

He was crying. One second he was beaming about her magic book, and the next he was sobbing and shaking all over.

"Bradley?"

He covered his face with his hands. Tears spilled out of his eyes.

"What is it?" asked Carla. "What happened?"

He shook his head.

Carla rose from the table, got a box of tissues, and placed it in front of him.

He pulled out a tissue, but didn't use it. "I've never been to a birthday party," he blubbered. Then he hiccupped.

"Not a real one, where other kids are there." He hiccupped again, then blew his nose. "A long time ago, when I was in the third grade I went to one, but then they made me go home because I sat on the cake."

"Well, you're a lot smarter now than you were when you were in the third grade," said Carla.

"But I don't remember what to do!" Bradley whined. "Do I have to bring my own chair?"

"Why would you have to bring your own chair?"

"For musical chairs. That's why I sat on the cake. I got mad because there was no place else to sit." He sniffled. "Will there be ice cream?"

"Don't you like ice cream?"

"What if they don't have enough for me? What if they only have enough for everybody else? And what about pin the tail on the donkey?"

"You don't have to bring your own donkey," said Carla.

He laughed through his tears. "But what if I stick it in a bad place?"

"You want to know what I think?" asked Carla. "I think you're a little overwhelmed by all that has happened to you. It's scared you. You think you're Cinderella."

"Cinderella?" he repeated, and laughed again.

"You're Cinderella and you've just been invited to the ball and now you're afraid that right in the middle of Colleen's birthday party, everything will suddenly turn into a pumpkin!"

He wiped his eyes on his tissue.

"You're afraid all the good things that happened will suddenly disappear. You're afraid everyone will suddenly stop liking you. But this isn't a fairy tale, Bradley. Your friends like you for who you are. My book wasn't magic. The magic is in you."

"Do I have to bring her a present?" he asked.

"You don't have to do anything," said Carla. "But it's a nice thing to do, don't you think? Colleen invited you to her birthday party because she likes you, and you give her a present because you like her and because you want to help celebrate her birthday."

"What should I get her? Should I get her a doll? Is that what girls like?"

"I don't know. Everyone likes different things. Give her something you like. If you like it, then she probably will too. Give her a gift from the heart."

"How about a shower curtain?" he asked.

"If it comes from the heart," said Carla.

He smiled.

When it was time for him to return to class, Carla said, "I enjoyed our visit very much. Thank you for sharing so much with me."

"The pleasure was mine," he replied. He had been waiting to say that.

The meeting between Carla Davis and the Concerned Parents Organization was held after school in room 8, a second-grade classroom.

Carla sat in a chair that was too small for her and faced the parents. She crossed her ankles and folded her hands on her lap. The five members of the school board sat behind her. The principal sat next to her, at the teacher's desk. Bradley's mother wasn't there. She was out with Bradley, shopping for Colleen's birthday present. Since she didn't have any complaints, she didn't come to the meeting. The only parents who came were those who had complaints.

"I'd like to know what we need a counselor for?" asked a father. "Kids have enough counseling. What they need is more discipline. If they're bad, they should be punished!"

The other parents clapped their hands.

"We need to get back to basics!" said a woman. "Reading, writing, and arithmetic. And, of course, computers." Her husband had a chart that showed that if the counselor was fired, there would be enough money to put a computer in every classroom.

Everyone got very excited about that idea. They all loved computers.

"No one is being fired," said the principal. "The purpose of this meeting is to give you a chance to ask Miss Davis questions."

"She told my son it was good to fail!" shouted a woman standing under a poster of an octopus. "She told him grades didn't matter."

"I never said it was good to fail," Carla calmly replied. "I simply tried to help him relax. Children learn better when they're not under pressure. They do better when they can enjoy school."

"My son doesn't go to school to have a good time," said the woman. "He has to get good grades so he can get into a good college!"

The principal reminded the parents that Miss Davis wouldn't see any of their children without their permission.

"But why should our tax dollars pay for her to counsel other people's children?" one of the mothers complained.

Several other parents agreed.

A woman with red hair stood up. "My daughter came home with one of those forms for us to sign, and we refused to sign it. We didn't want her seeing the counselor. We try to give her all the counseling she needs at home. But then we found out the counselor's been talking to her anyway."

"What's your daughter's name?" asked the principal.

"Colleen Verigold."

Carla admitted that she had seen Colleen without her parents' permission. "Colleen came into my office very upset and said she had to talk to me. She said it was an emergency."

"What kind of emergency?" asked the school board president.

"It was something very personal," said Carla.

"But what was it?" asked the school board president.

"I'm sorry," said Carla. "I never repeat anything a child tells me." She knew Colleen wouldn't want everybody to know she had gone into the boys' bathroom.

"You're not supposed to see a child without her parents' permission," said the school board president. "Now if it was an emergency, then you might have been justified. But we have to know the nature of the emergency."

"I'm sorry," said Carla.

"You can tell me," said Mrs. Verigold. "I'm her mother. If there was an emergency, don't you think I should know about it?"

"Ask Colleen. If she wants to tell you, she will. I can't break my promise to her."

"But Colleen's just a child," said a member of the school board. "You don't have to keep promises to children."

"I do," said Carla.

"She's been trying to make her change religions," said Colleen's mother. "Colleen came home from school and announced she didn't want to be Catholic anymore. She wants to be a Zen monk!"

Carla laughed, though she knew that was a mistake. She tried to explain about saying hello back to someone who says hello to you, but nobody seemed to understand what that had to do with being a Zen monk.

"You're not allowed to teach religion in public school," said the president of the school board. "And you weren't even supposed to talk to her child in the first place." He apologized to Colleen's mother and assured her it wouldn't happen again.

A woman in the front row raised her hand. "I never had a counselor when I went to school," she said. "I don't understand what they do, exactly."

"Why don't you explain to the parents what you do and how you help different children?" the principal suggested. "Mostly, I just talk with them," said Carla. "I listen to their problems, but I never tell them what to do. I try to help them to learn to think for themselves."

"But isn't that what school is for?" asked the woman. "To tell kids what to think?"

"I believe it's more important to teach them how to think, instead of what to think," said Carla.

"But if they do something bad, don't you tell them it's wrong?" asked the man sitting next to her.

"No," said Carla. "I think it's much better if they figure that out for themselves."

"What if there was a boy who bit his teacher?" asked a father.

"What?" Carla exclaimed.

"Wouldn't you tell him not to bite her?" he asked.

"No, I'd talk to him about it and try to find out why he bit her, but—"

"What if he keeps on biting her?" asked the man. "What if every day he sneaks up behind her and bites her on her butt? Then what would you do?"

"This is getting ridiculous," said Carla.

"Tell him what you'd do," said the principal.

Carla sighed. "I'd try to help the boy understand the reason he wants to bite his teacher, and then help him reach the conclusion that he shouldn't do it."

"How long would that take?" asked a woman.

"I don't know."

"A month?"

"Possibly."

"And meanwhile he keeps biting his teacher!" said the first man. "She could get seriously hurt!"

"She could die," said another man. "How would you feel then?"

"What if the kid had rabies?" someone else shouted. "Don't you think he should get a rabies shot?"

"I bet you'd feel differently if he bit you on your butt!" someone called from the back of the room.

Everyone began talking at once.

"What if he bit you?"

"You'd punish him then, wouldn't you?"

"Then you wouldn't wait for him to think for himself, would you? Not if he bit you!"

"What if he bit you?"

Carla uncrossed her ankles, then crossed them the other way. As she looked at the angry group of parents, she had the horrible feeling that they all wanted to bite her butt.

Bradley Chalkers

Homework

Book Report

My Parents Didn't

Steal an Elephant

By Uriah C. Lasso

Mrs. Ebbel's class

Room 12

Red Hill School

Last seat, last row

Next to Jeff

My Parents Didn't Steal an Elephant by Uriah C. Lasso

by Bradley Chalkers

My Parents Didn't Steal an Elephant was a very funny and crazy book by Uriah C. Lasso, a funny author to write such a book. It is a story told by a kid. The kid's parents are in jail because they stole an elephant, except they are innocent. Hey! I just realized something. You know what? You never know the kid's name! I just realized that. You know what else too? You don't know if the kid is a boy or a girl! I just realized that right now as I was writing this book report because I didn't know whether to write he or she. I told you it was crazy!

The kid lives with his aunt and uncle. They're crazy too. They put wallpaper up in the garage for no reason. I told you they were crazy.

Ace is crazy too. He's the lawyer for the kid's parents. He makes the kid practice crying for an hour every day so the kid will be able to cry good in court. Only when the kid finally gets to court, the kid doesn't cry. The kid laughs!

Then everybody else laughs too. Then the kid's parents get to go home because they're innocent.

Except, do you want to know something? I'm not so sure! I mean, if they really were really innocent, then who ate all the peanuts?

I told you it was crazy. The end.

The End

"Absolutely wonderful!" said Carla.

"Is it good?" asked Bradley.

"You captured the very essence of the book."

He smiled even though he didn't know what essence meant.

They were sitting around the round table. It was Thursday before school. Bradley had to turn in his book report to Mrs. Ebbel, but he wanted Carla to see it first, just in case he ripped it up.

Carla was wearing a fluffy pink sweater. "I always wondered what happened to the peanuts too," she said.

"Me too," said Bradley. "And they could have hid the elephant in the garage. That's why they put wallpaper there. To cover up the fingerprints!"

"Do elephants have fingerprints?" asked Carla.

"Maybe they have trunk prints." He laughed. "Well, I have to go to Mrs. Ebbel's class. Here's your book back. Thank you. I didn't write on it or spill food or anything."

"I'd like for you to keep it," said Carla. "It's my present to you."

"But I thought it was one of your favorite books?"

"It is. That's why I want to give it to you. If I didn't like it, then it wouldn't be much of a present, would it?"

He smiled. "I wish I had a present to give you," he said.

"You already gave me one."

"I did? What was it?"

"The book report."